

## Hunger Pangs

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32316703) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32316703>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">Gen</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Shingeki no Kyojin</a>   <a href="#">Attack on Titan</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Levi Ackerman &amp; Eren Yeager</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Eren Yeager</a> , <a href="#">Levi Ackerman</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Tags Contain Spoilers</a> , <a href="#">Cults</a> , <a href="#">Cannibalism</a> , <a href="#">Imprisonment</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Emotional Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Shingeki no Kyojin</a>   <a href="#">Attack on Titan</a> <a href="#">Season/Series 01</a> , <a href="#">Hurt Eren Yeager</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">eren whump &gt;:)</a>
Stats:	Published: 2021-07-02 Words: 8,057 Chapters: 1/1

# Hunger Pangs

by [On a Happier Note](#)

## Summary

He craved his humanity, to be told there's nothing wrong with him, more so than any food. He wanted to earn his freedom, he wanted his merit to mean something; that he became strong of his own accord, that his dreams and ambitions weren't stupid. Originally Levi thought these were the only things chaining the beast, manipulative devices to drive him for their cause. But seeing this shattered teen on the floor, he realised it was the opposite. Eren clung to those chains, tethering himself to these comforting normalities and desperately hoping they were real and true.

## Notes

Set after the end of episode 14/ chapter 19 (Eren's trial just finished).

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Eren had been missing for two days now which was entirely unacceptable to Levi. In the unstable state of current affairs and the fragile terms of their custody, two days could spell disaster for not just the Corps' operations and plans, but humanity itself.

---

Thinking back to the day of the kidnapping, Levi assumed that someone had disclosed classified information to the responsible group. Eren's existence, appearance and location had been leaked and he'd been taken in a premeditated act. The perpetrators couldn't have possibly known who won the trial, so it seemed unlikely this was planned by another military branch. This introduced yet another interested party to get in the Survey Corps' way.

That day, after Eren's trial, Levi, Eren, Hange, Mike and Erwin had left the courtroom together and briefly discussed their next movements. They were eager to get to the former Survey Corps HQ to start planning and preparing for their upcoming expedition. Eren was shackled again and ordered to stay near Levi more for appearance's sake, not that the boy seemed bothered by this. While he occasionally glanced at Levi with thinly veiled fear, he appeared more at ease than they'd ever seen him.

Since Levi's speech in the courtroom, all other military personnel had avoided coming anywhere near them. It was like they'd only just realised how dangerous this small cadet truly was. Their captivity of Eren had been purely voluntary and if properly provoked, there would be nothing they could do as he turned this city to ashes. Waiting away from the other military divisions for their carriage, Eren, completely oblivious to the surrounding animosity, tried to engage the others in conversation.

Eren had said even in his cadet years where they stripped you down as a person, he hadn't felt as worthless and insignificant as he had in that courtroom. The Survey Corps, though he thought their methods unorthodox, made him feel valued not just as a soldier but as a person. He'd even seemed appreciative in hindsight of the severe beating Levi gave him; comparing him to his Drill Sergeant doling out punishment for speaking out of turn.

Levi found it both amusing and disturbing that it brought this kid a sense of calming normality to be forcefully inducted into their branch after being brutally beaten by your superior and assigned executioner. How messed up had his life become for this to be the best outcome? Sadly, Levi knew all too well from experience how Commander Erwin recruited his biggest weapons; weaponise their hope and make them regret they ever dared to dream.

Just as Levi was going to affirm to Eren how sad and pathetic his life was, a carriage pulled up in front of them. Their first mistake was not realising it lacked military insignia. Its side door burst open revealing multiple persons adorned in crude crimson hessian robes with necklaces and bracelets strung with large wooden teeth. More importantly each held a gun of some description.

"Scatter!"

With instincts honed from years on the field, his comrades evaded the various shots fired haphazardly in their direction. Levi yanked Eren by his collar, trying to escape the barrage of bullets, but they didn't make it far with Eren's bound hands and state of shock. He glanced back with undisguised horror to see Eren shot twice in the chest before crumpling to the cobblestone below. Their poor marksmanship was a farce; Eren was their intended target.

The screams in his periphery swelled as soldiers and civilians alike evacuated the area. Yells to retreat and shrieks of terror sounded in response to the heavily bleeding kid on the pavement.

With the gunshots ceased, Levi dropped to Eren's side, not taking his eyes off the attackers exiting the carriage and holding off his allies. The wheezing breaths and wet hacking coughs assured him Eren was alive, but in no state to escape. He could feel the steam rising off his wounds like that of a smoking gun. Weird little brat.

"Oi speck, away with you, we'll take it from here."

Levi narrowed his eyes. Unarmed and with no backup against these assailants, he really had no choice but to back off. As he joined the others held at gunpoint, one of the larger attackers roughly swung Eren over their shoulder. The boy convulsed in agony at the rough change in position and pressure applied to his wounds. A shrill shriek pierced Levi's ears as Eren's eyes burst wide open before rolling back as he passed out from the pain. Unable to intervene, Levi and the others stood in silence as the group loaded him into their carriage before boarding themselves. Placing sentinels sticking out the back, they couldn't approach or give chase as the horses pulled the entourage away.

He watched, half-expecting the carriage to explode out from the inside, a raging titan spawning to rampage in this densely-populated area. But thinking back, the kid had just been beaten to a pulp and told he'd be executed if he lost control. Kid had his hands tied in more ways than one. This was also assuming he was conscious to realise his dilemma.

With everyone but the leading members of the Survey Corps fled from the scene, and others unwilling to approach, let alone save Eren in this state, no one hindered their escape from town.

All Levi could do was curse their lack of ODM gear and weapons and watch the asset they'd fought so hard for get whisked away.

---

After a few days filled with investigating, questioning, and searching, Erwin had eventually narrowed down where Eren had been taken. For the people who'd brazenly kidnapped him just outside the courtroom weren't wearing disguises or poor tastes in fashion like previously thought, but some cult's ensemble. And after quite the investigation, they found some townsfolk who recognised the outfit's description. Apparently, a few individuals had been spotted wearing these clothes over the last few years in that area, although they didn't know the significance of it. And so, Levi had left on horseback for that town a few hours before sundown.

Levi was sent alone in civilian attire to not alert the town of the Survey Corps' presence and risk Eren being moved or hurt. In the end, Eren was Levi's responsibility and he'd yet to fail an order of Erwin's. He'd get Eren back and make those responsible pay.

Levi was anxious though, whoever this group who had captured Eren were, they obviously wanted him alive. But for what purpose? Probably something stupid like sacrificing him to the wall or hoping to control his monstrous power for themselves. He wasn't about to let these idiots squander humanity's biggest chance at knowledge of and retaliation against this harsh world's reality.

While Yeager was a powder keg of anger, passion and power, Levi was willing along with all his fellow soldiers to take a risk on him. He saw hope something could change. Something substantial could be gained in a way he hasn't seen his whole career.

Having a being that could stand eye-to-eye with titans, to fight those horrors in the same class was a game changer.

The approaching town brought him back to attention; he had limited daylight remaining to find Eren or he'd be waiting until tomorrow. He refused to leave his charge in the hands of these bastards likely doing nefarious things to him a moment longer than necessary.

Trotting into town, he met no resistance tying up his horse in the communal stable. This settlement was sufficiently large to have regular amounts of travellers and merchants passing through without suspicion so Levi blended in as he made his way around town.

Casing out the shadier streets, he located and tailed a man wearing a toothed bracelet to a small warehouse on the outskirts of the nearby forest. Watching from an adjacent roof (no one thinks to look up), he observed his lead join a large group outside the building, some changing out of their group's garb, others already plain-clothed. The lamps inside were extinguished and they locked up the front. This left Levi confused; did they really leave no one behind to guard Eren? The building could continue deeper underground where light didn't escape, which would make sense for holding someone who could turn into a titan captive. The government had even done the same thing with Eren since his first transformation.

Waiting for the gathering to disperse, he watched the watery colours of the sunset dissipate over the forest. He saw night-time as most freeing; no titans, less people around and the starry sky provided him a blanket of cover. He was used to the dark anyway.

After circling the building and finding no other entrances (breaking a window for entry would be too noisy), he set to work lockpicking the front door. Aside from Eren being his charge, he felt this was also the reason he was assigned to his recovery mission alone. Commander Erwin always used the strength of his troops to their full potential. Even when that strength was stealth, breaking and entering and stealing.

His definitely nonstandard military issue tools made quick work of the lock. Hearing no sounds inside, he eased open the door and closed it softly behind himself.

Too dark to investigate, Levi lit their still-warm oil lamp and held it up to explore the room.

It was rather open plan for a small warehouse, just one spacious room with a large table in the foreground for meetings, a stage surrounded by a semicircle of chairs in the back and memorabilia scattered throughout. The first bizarre thing to catch his eye was the enormous grotesque fresco on the back wall depicting blood, gore, and the disfigured humanoid caricatures of titans. Taking a closer look, he found similar scenes shown in statues and paintings adorning all surfaces of the place.

The simple conclusion was that this is the gathering place for a titan-worshipping cult. He always thought the Wallists were insane, but this was complete madness. Praising the brainless bug-eyed bastards imprisoning humanity was sickeningly comical. Maybe after all this he could invite them to leave the walls to meet the titans they so obviously fetishised.

At least Hange's obsession is supposedly scientific, and even then it's tame compared to this.

Regardless of a titan's strength, size and supposed immortality, Levi couldn't wrap, or more so warp his mind around the idea of glorifying them. At least this probably meant Eren was alive; these sick shits likely wanted to become titans or maybe just worship him. Levi didn't miss the dramatic irony of a cult of titan-lovers worshipping the biggest titan-hater he knew.

Searching around the premises, he eventually located a broom closet with a hidden door revealing a staircase leading into the darkness below. He pocketed a large ring of keys left so obviously on a key hook. If crime was this easy back then in the underground, he wouldn't be half as skilled as he was today.

The fact that they had all departed for the night and left Eren unguarded surprised Levi the most. Did they think Eren just turned off at night? He's not actually a titan.

He descended the steps, the tapping of his footsteps bouncing loudly off the cold walls.

---

The setting reminded him of where he'd first officially meet Eren in the court dungeons.

He remembered seeing those vivid eyes aflame with conviction even when held in that bleak prison; a burning rage too vast for this cramped, conformist world. A fire astonishingly contained in a 15-year-old human vessel. His stare, emotion and unblemished skin in this hostile and unforgiving existence hinted most at his inhuman nature.

Knowing he was that Rogue Titan he'd heard about made more sense than him being a normal human. A rogue amongst titans and humans, a supernatural reckoning equal to that of gods and devils. Eren's titan form seemed truer to his nature than his human form; the latter a smouldering ember awaiting a spark to ignite. And it was Levi's duty to both foster this inferno and extinguish its possible uncontrolled blaze.

Reining in his thoughts, he realised he'd reached the bottom of the staircase, the silence of the

space encompassing.

The stairwell opened out into a long, naturally-occurring cavern which extended beyond which his lantern could reveal.

He started to hear quiet sniffing as he progressed towards the end of the chamber, the lantern light reflecting off bars caging off the back section into a cell. So this is where these crazies had kept Eren.

He could see the boy's shoulders tensed and shaking from his curled up position in the far corner of the rudimentary cell.

Eren startled at the sound of footsteps, surprised that someone was down here so late. Shining the light before him, Levi saw the boy was restrained with what seemed to be barbed wire entwining his wrists and attached to the wall. His captors had given him an oversized and partially unbuttoned shirt alongside some scraggly trousers, making Eren appear smaller than he really was. His haggard appearance also drew attention; the kid had been able to heal those gunshot wounds, but it looked to have taken everything to do so. Supported by the wall behind him, he slowly raised his head, the shadows highlighting its newly sunken and angular nature.

The only other object of interest was a half-full bowl of stew which looked like Eren had pushed it as far away from himself with his foot. While otherwise freshly scrubbed, the cell still bore the faint tang of vomit. Wrinkling his nose, he spotted a puddle of sick off to the kid's side. *Is he ill? Levi wondered, Physically or psychologically tortured? Or just overly drained and stressed at the situation and too stubborn to eat?*

Once Eren's eyes adapted to the light, Levi saw recognition in them and if anything, his sniffing increased. Not that Levi expected a warm welcome or anything, but he thought Eren would be at least somewhat happy to see him.

The last thing he expected was for those big, green, expressive eyes to tear up at the sight of him.

Busying himself with unlocking the door, Levi wondered what they could've done to the boy to warrant such a reaction. Eren had demonstrated a high pain tolerance and stubborn nature; his captors must have found a particular sore point to cause this level of distress.

Eren's stomach growled at the lukewarm meal in front of him and the built-up tears streamed down his cheeks.

"Captain?" his voice was congested with emotion. "C-could you please get that bowl away from me?" Confused by the odd request but not going to question him just yet, he picked up the offending object and set it down outside the bars. Eren closed his eyes after that, his breathing somewhat evening out. "I... Didn't know you'd find me so soon. What's it been? Two days? A soldier's sleep schedule really helps you keep the time." He let out an empty bark of laughter at that, before falling into silence again.

If anything, this display made Levi even more suspicious something had happened here. He knelt in front of the cadet to gain his undivided attention.

“Alright, cut the crap Yeager. It wouldn't take an expert – and I'm a fine judge of character – to notice there's something really off about you. What'd they do to you to get you in such a state? Is that food drugged or something?” At the mention of it, Eren looked over to it with gritted teeth. “Eren. I want to help but you need to tell me what's going on.”

Looking into Levi's piercing gaze did unnerve and even scare Eren at times. Although seeing the faintest hint of genuine concern in his expression really did humanise the man's stony facade. Providing an explanation didn't appear to be optional either.

With a resigned look, Eren started from the beginning.

---

“After I got shot, the first thing I clearly remember was waking up down here. Whoever these bastards are, they talked about me and titans all the time, in some creepy, glorifying way. They're some sort of titan cult, aren't they? I used to hear rumours of them existing.” Levi nodded.

“From the distasteful trinkets I saw upstairs to their pathetic dresses; I'd assume so.”

“Right. Other than watching me, they didn't interact with me at all. They'd talk amongst themselves but never too me or in response to anything I said. The only exception to this was food. They were unusually insistent about me eating.” This worried Levi, maybe they had poisoned or drugged him to test out his healing abilities. It would make sense that this group would only care about his titan-like characteristics.

“Obviously something had to be wrong with the food.” Levi was pleased the kid possessed basic deduction skills. “So, at every meal I'd only drink the water given after examining it. This annoyed them, but all they'd do was take it away and try again later. They knew it was only a matter of time before I'd have to eat something.”

Looking at Eren's sickly and drained visage, Levi couldn't help but agree. After the amount of blood lost alongside needing to regenerate himself, it was impressive he had been able to hold out so long. Obstinateness was the primary takeaway from reading the kid's file which this only supported. Regardless of how obstinate, powerful and titan-like he was at times, he was still somewhat human and required nourishment to survive.

“I had no idea when or even if the Scouts would find me, and I was growing dizzy and tired. I didn't want to become too weak in their captivity for fear of what they might do so I hoped my abilities would stave off any ill effects from the food.” Eren's semblance of composure slipped away as he spoke, agitating himself up to a hysteria as he fell into his memories.

“I haven't had meat often, I didn't realise what it was at first,” he blurted frantically, “And then I was halfway through when I realised-I realised-“ His rambling was cut off as his thin frame was racked with spasms, leaning over and retching off to the side. Nothing came up as this obviously wasn't the first time this had happened recently. The strangled sounds and laboured breathing echoing in the shadowy dungeon filled Levi's chest with ice.



It finally clicked into place. That stew had meat in it. He could smell it. But having a look at it now, it wasn't any animal meat he was aware of. *It wasn't animal meat.*

"Captain, I didn't know!" Eren wailed wretchedly. He curled further into himself, the strain on his bindings drawing fresh blood to fall with gentle plips to the ground.

"Eren stop moving; you're hurting yourself." Trying to keep a calm and coaxing tone, Levi felt a bitingly cold rage rise inside him. Feeding this lot to the titans would be too kind; he wanted to incinerate this godforsaken place with them in it. Purge it and its memory from existence.

Levi edged forward and restrained Eren's shoulders against the wall, holding him still as he feebly struggled. His panicked pants gave way to exhausted wheezes as all his fight left him.

Balancing Eren one-handedly, he searched through his supplies for a pair of cutters.

The barbed wire was embedded in his wrists, so Levi was taking his time to find the most painless way to remove it. The horribly lacerated skin showed no signs of healing which both confused and worried him.

"Oh, that?" Eren supplied, thinking Levi was looking at the wire, "They liked to watch the steam." He stated it like a commonplace fact in such a hollow tone. There was no steam now.

*I am ordering Erwin to burn this building. I don't often request personal favours through my position, but this calls for an exception. Let this become an unmarked pyre for depravity.*

Much cutting, tweezing, and twisting later, he'd freed Eren's wrists. He lowered them gently down to the boy's sides as he'd been boneless throughout the whole ordeal. Levi hadn't brought bandages with him; he had packed light and didn't think Eren would require any first aid. He didn't know Eren could halt his healing. He really didn't understand that much about the kid or know how to help him.

"Right. We're getting out of this hellhole."

Receiving silence from someone who liked to ask questions and speak his mind at the worst of times was mildly disconcerting. Levi felt the need to fill the silence, to verbalise his actions and give the kid some semblance of normality and control to the situation.

"I'm going to pick you up now; stay still as I don't want to add 'fell down a staircase' to the shitty things about today." He received a stiff nod in reply.

Levi hoisted him across his shoulders and Eren found it oddly comforting with how reminiscent it was of all the times Mikasa had done a similar thing. Usually the act was accompanied by some version of 'Eren, you've been an idiot and now we need to get out of here.' And while he'd always fuss and argue, Mikasa taking care of him was when he felt the safest and most at home. Through all his complaining, she never stopped or changed her ways; she must've constantly noticed how he relaxed in her hold.

Eren's muscles relaxed under Levi's hands.

---

The two fell into a companionable silence as he carried him up and out of the nightmarish place.

As they reached the front door, Levi was formulating a plan for how best to address their current situation. With Eren injured and barely capable of walking, he planned to first retrieve his horse as he'd left his additional supplies with it, and then to leave town immediately. He extinguished the lamp and left the building, pleased that there was enough moonlight to illuminate their surroundings. He was used to navigating in near darkness anyway.

Keeping to shadowy backstreets, he made his way back to the stables. No one was around to see the short soldier carrying a teenage deadweight, so they crossed the yard and entered the rudimentary wooden structure. His horse quietly nickered in greeting when he located its stall and he was honestly relieved to see it. The last few days had been tense and taxing on him, constantly searching for any information to help locate his charge. He wasn't sure what state he'd find Eren in when he arrived; if he would be dead, uncontrollable, or if he'd find him at all. It was far from uncommon for people to disappear without a lead, without a body for closure.

He'd lost friends, he'd lost people under his charge before, and although his skills of accepting it and moving forward had improved, he valued and never forgot one of them. And if he could save any of his soldiers from a meaningless death or alleviate mental torment, he'd do so where possible. But to lose someone so young and valuable, and have it happen right before him without being able to do a thing, brought rise to unfamiliar levels of anger and helplessness.

Having found Eren only held captive, albeit abused and half-famished, was sadly one of the best outcomes imaginable and he was looking forward to putting this chapter behind him. His mission was a success, asset retrieved, he could mount his horse and resume with following Erwin's plans like the last few days never happened.

And maybe a few days ago he might have, but after witnessing the aftermath of what Eren went through, he was starting to view the titan teen as not just an asset. He wasn't a mindless titan like the ones Hange liked to experiment on, or an unfeeling weapon to be controlled and wielded on the battlefield. His charge was a soldier, and a recruit at that. An inexperienced, emotional teenager thrust into a position of public scrutiny, burdened with responsibility, and targeted for his power. He had been shot, kidnapped, and tortured physically and mentally in no less than a few days.

Seeing the glazed, despondent look currently in Eren's eyes, it's clear to him that the priority is to get some fire back in them. Even if it's with a brief respite to treat his wounds and unpack his feelings on what happened to him, Levi sees this as much more important than hastening their return to base.

The Survey Corps saw Eren as an invaluable asset and wanted to wield Eren as a weapon. And the man most experienced with this feeling had been planning on doing the same thing.

Time for a change in plan.

“Use your elbows to hold onto the horse’s neck, don’t move or let anything touch your wrists.” Again, he received only a quick nod. Stilling his mount with a pat to its smooth gunmetal grey hindquarters, he then shifted Eren off his shoulders and into his arms before hefting him as gently as he could unto the saddle. With a muffled grunt, Eren lent forward in the saddle, resting his upper body heavily unto the horse’s neck. It looked to take all his strength and concentration just to hold this position. “I heard a stream not far into the forest near where we were earlier. We’ll loop around and find it downstream as we leave this town.” Untying his horse, he led it by the reins through the winding lanes to the forest.

---

The quiet, hollow clops of horse hooves on cobblestone gave way to the firm beats and light rustling of leaf litter underfoot. Passing the tree line, the serene and earthy air put them further at ease. The simplicity of nature always had a freeing and calming effect on him, and it seemed to help Eren equally. He spies Eren glancing around in the low light at the trees and shrubs around them in a more curious and relaxed manner than before. As they walked further in, the soft rumbling of a stream became more apparent until they finally spotted it in a clearing illuminated by moonlight. This would be an ideal place to recover.

“Roll towards me; this will be far from a graceful dismount, but me catching you will be better than the ground doing so.” After a brief meeting of stares, Eren slowly slouched towards him and into his arms and he lent him up against a boulder near the water while he rummaged through his saddlebags. Other than his assortment of concealable weapons and tools, he only had a small amount of coin, field rations and a half-empty canteen. His second saddlebag concealed his ODM gear which with no reports of a titan within the walls, he hadn’t equipped on this expedition to avoid drawing attention.

He’d have to improvise in treating Eren’s wrists.

Collecting his canteen, he bent down at the stream and filled it, the fresh water cold and invigorating on his hands. He then handed it to Eren. “Drink, get the taste of vomit out of your mouth, you’ll feel better.” While looking sickened as he remembered *why* he vomited, he took a long drink from it and started to at least look more cognizant.

“Thanks Captain.” His voice sounded better too. Though exhausted, he looked marginally better prepared to have a conversation and not pass out at his feet. Taking the canteen back, he refilled it and washed his hands in the current before approaching Eren again, the other confused by this.

“Hold your wrists out.” They’d mostly stopped bleeding but hadn’t healed at all. Levi and Hange could ponder this later but for now the wounds would be treated like any other soldier’s wounds. He poured the water over them, rubbing away the encrusted blood and washing out any debris in the deeper cuts. The boy winced under the rough ministrations, trying to keep any signs of pain or flinching to a minimum. Deeming them clean enough, Levi went back to his saddlebags and retrieved the cutters from earlier. The other was still holding his wrists out in front of himself when Levi came back, as if intrigued by the red, inflamed grooves encircling them.

Sitting on a rock next to him, Levi unfastened his ascot and pulled the long, white material loose from around his neck. If Eren had looked confused by his actions earlier, it was nothing

compared to Levi then folding the cloth in half before cutting along the fold. His brain finally clicked as to what his superior was doing, and he pulled his wrists back towards his chest.

“Captain Levi! You don’t have to- my wrists will heal soon enough.”

“They’re not healing now so I’m bandaging them. Uncovered injuries are unsanitary.”

“You really don’t have to-”

“Is there a reason you want me to *not* bandage your wounds?” Eren froze at that statement accompanied by Levi’s level and piercing stare.

“No, it’s just, I didn’t expect this treatment from you.” Eren had looked up to Levi for years. And then in the last week been beaten up by him and had him assigned his executioner. He felt it was fair to not have a clue how to act around the man as he seemed to be a contradiction of actions to him.

“You have been assigned to my care. The killing part was emphasised in court to satisfy the Sina shits, however, all you need to understand is that I am your squad leader and *you are in my care.*” Eren stared at him for a moment, shocked, then offered his wrists to Levi.

“Understood.” Levi then methodically swathed each wrist, tying off the ends, before grabbing a ration block from his supplies, unwrapping an end, and handed it to the boy.

“All I’ve got is field rations, it’s no boiled potato, but I think you’ll survive.”

“Boiled potato?”

“I heard you lot of cadets caused a small-scale potato shortage in the military supply lines. I also heard one of you was insane enough to eat one at their first line-up.”

“Those events were both caused by the same cadet Sir.” There was a short pause where Levi just stared at him.

“There's something intrinsically wrong with your cohort.” Eren gave a small smile at that. His food remained untouched in his hand. “I wasn’t just kidding around about the food kid. *Eat.*”

Eren looked down at the cracker block, a staple on many training exercises he’d partaken in over his cadet years. No strong smell or taste, dry and crunchy, safe and familiar. Though it barely looked it, his body recognised it as food, salivating and telling him to eat. Breaking off a corner with his teeth and chewing mechanically, he watched the flowing water and tried to keep his mind a blissful blank. Levi went over to fill his canteen for the third time.

*I’m just on an expedition, far from civilisation, eating this bland cracker bar as my squad is preparing to turn in for the night.* And it wasn’t *too* far from the truth. Though it was Levi’s mission and he was the objective, he had no idea what they were doing next and he was still too close to a certain town with a certain building...

He'd chewed too long, the food turned to slush that unignorably paralleled his earlier meal. *It had tasted better*, the horrible thought intruded to the forefront of his mind. *Your body saw it as food; why did you stop eating?*

The presence of the food sat heavily on his tongue, the not-really-good-or-bad taste permeated his mouth and nose. *What is in this? Anything could be in this.*

His jaw locked tight. Stuck between swallowing and spitting it out, he barely registered the warm, wet paths of tears streaming down his face.

*This is human food. Captain Levi himself has given this to me, there's nothing wrong with it.* But he'd thought the same thing about what his captors had fed him. They had fed him humans. They had fed him a meal fit for a titan. And he'd *liked* it. He felt his throat seize up, choking him as he sat trembling there with his head in his hands.

It was like that stew, human remains. But he was starving, he needed to eat. It was like the *inside of a titan's stomach-*

Eat. Chew. Breathe. Swallow. Spit it *out*.

"...Oi, brat! Are you still with me?"

Shocked back to reality, he quickly turned away from the man crouching in front of him to throw up everything in his mouth, coughing wetly as he heaved in breaths. He stayed there, shaking, his hands pulling up soil as he tried to collect himself. Once his breathing was back under control, he clumsily pushed himself back up into a sitting position, observing Levi opposite him do the same thing.

"What's going to happen to me Sir?" The question caught Levi momentarily off guard. He thought Eren already knew what was going on. At his silence, Eren ventured on. "I mean that's it, isn't it? I ate human. I showed my true nature. I couldn't control my hunger. I broke my agreement with the Survey Corps. Will I be handed over to the Military Police?"

Levi didn't want to contemplate what the Military Police could do with this event out of context. He would at least inform them about this place – there could possibly be more human remains hidden within or around it from their forsaken practices.

And the kid seems especially traumatised by what they gave him to eat. It's clear he feels tainted by the act, betrayed and disgusted by his own body. While this unaware cannibalism would leave anyone distraught, Eren linked this act to his inhuman, monstrous, titan nature. He saw it as the deathblow to his perception of himself as a normal human, of someone deserving and belonging to this world in the walls.

And the only things anchoring him to this world are his friends, hopes, dreams and perceived vague vestiges of humanity. Originally Levi thought these were the only things chaining the beast, manipulative devices to drive him for their cause. But seeing this shattered teen on the floor, he realised it was the opposite. Eren clung to those chains, tethering himself to these comforting normalities and desperately hoping they were real and true. Trying to ignore everyone's changed perception of him to clutch at the broken links to his past.

After the incident report he'd read about Eren's encounter with Captain Woermann and witnessing his trial, Levi figured Eren was still having an identity crisis about his humanity. This was the one big chain that all the others depended on and if it broke like this, there would be no fighting inferno, just a small child watching their small flame of hope die.

And after how those titan-cultists treated him, locking him away in the dark, hurting him, treating him like a beast. And then as a final straw, feeding him human flesh like it was befitting of him, his tether to his self-worth, his worth as a human being had fractured.

His whole life surmounted to a sick joke where he became the very thing he hated. All the strength he gained through hardship in the military would go unutilised and unappreciated in comparison to his titan power. Every action of his under scrutiny for inhuman qualities. He himself would think he's a monster to be controlled then destroyed.

He wouldn't be seen as human.

He wouldn't be seen as Eren.

No one wanted Eren.

And Levi was going to do his damndest to fix this.

This stupid, hot-headed, spirited brat deserved better.

"Let me make this clear; forget about the Military Police. They lost the trial. They can go piss off to the inner walls and mope about tax rates or whatever the fuck they do in the interior. You're part of the Survey Corps now and you answer to me. In our operations, I am the one to judge if you pose a threat and the only thing you've demonstrated being a threat to lately is yourself."

"But Sir-" Levi interrupted him and pressed on.

"That stew. Did you know there was human in it?"

"No."

"Did you continue eating once you discovered it was human, even though you were starving?"

"No."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"No!"

"Well then. I see no problem here." Eren glared incredulously at him. "Even if you had continued eating, I wouldn't have blamed you. It's not like you had much of a choice and like you said earlier, you had no way of knowing I would turn up today. I'd have preferred you survive, even if it meant putting up with their sick practices. You didn't kill anyone, you

didn't have any other option if you wanted to survive so remember this; you're the victim here, you didn't do anything wrong."

Eren looked down at the ration tightly gripped in his hand, he knew what the Captain was saying was correct, but... "When I first met you in that cell, you were relatively fine with being part titan or whatever you are. You were treated badly even then though you persevered. You've been ostracised, imprisoned, shot, bashed but it was obviously the food that broke you and changed your view of yourself and I want to know, why?"

Eren looked almost guilty at his statement and Levi thought he'd pushed too hard and caused Eren to clam up again. He understood that he was probably amongst the last people Eren would want to have a heart-to-heart with, but Levi needed to know. Just as he was about to try another approach, Eren started talking, and the words just kept pouring out.

---

"After Wall Maria had fallen and the refugees had been sent to tend barren farmlands, rations started to run out and we knew we were on the verge of famine. When people are desperate, they can do the most heinous things to survive and the Military Police were aware of it. They severely punished food theft and aided the spread of this myth that if any human resorted to cannibalism, they would turn into a titan themselves." Levi raised an eyebrow at that. It was blatantly untrue and doubted even the most uneducated peasant would hold it for much value. "Though Armin's grandfather assured us that it was all lies, gullible ten-year-old me would always think about it when I couldn't sleep at night."

"Could humans really turn into such warped, savage beasts? Did human taste that good to them that they would eat nothing else? Maybe human flesh was cursed and addictive and turned them into mindless monsters. Maybe they hid this fact from residents of the inner walls and kicked the poorer, starving outer residents out the walls when they transformed. And then I'd think of the titans, clawing at the walls, their bottomless, insatiable hunger overtaking everything until there was nothing left but a walking stomach. I'd think of my mother, eaten in front of me by a titan who seemed to enjoy the act as she thrashed and screamed."

Going silent for a moment, Eren absentmindedly rubbed at his wrists. He looked embarrassed to be voicing these childhood fears whereas Levi reflected on how without proper guidance and reassurance, a young mind could be easily influenced. Fear and lies affected the vulnerable greatly and stories like this coming from a supposedly trustworthy source gave more credibility to it. *I can add 'terrifying children' to my list of standard Military Police practice.*

Eren eventually continued. "Even when I knew this myth was false, it stayed there in the back of my mind. No matter how bad the famine got, I promised myself that death would always be the better option than resorting to such means. Better to die a human than become a monster. And of course, attending the titan anatomy and behaviour classes should've put to rest that myth and all the other absurd rumours the cadets spread." Levi had witnessed firsthand that the utter bullshit about titans permeating from both the poor and nobility held no bounds. Miseducation about them inhibited the Survey Corps' operation long before they get to leave the walls.

“But when I woke up inside a titan in Trost, I had definitely swallowed human blood and I transformed into a titan for the first time. And then when I woke up, to transform again I bit into my hand instinctively, something I would’ve never considered doing before. Even if it was my own hand, to feel compelled to bite so hard into skin, to taste blood, for it to feel so *natural*...”

Eren paused looking a bit disgusted by himself. “For this to be the trigger; it was my childhood nightmare made reality. It’s made me question so many things I thought true, basic facts about myself and the world were no longer as indisputable as they’d once been. Although I have those memories of my father injecting me with something, I still can’t believe it took just that to turn me into what I am now. What if this could only happen to me? If there was something truly wrong with me from the start?”

“And despite everything I’d learned and been through, I could never forget that stupid story. And especially now it feels more real. I wonder if I’ll lose all my control like I did in Trost when I tried to crush Mikasa, who’s family to me. If I’ll wake up with my humanity extinguished one day with only a feral, ferocious creature remaining. If I’ll lose myself to the transformation and be stuck a titan forever, have no place within the walls and lose everything I have left.

“I’ve barely had time to process everything that’s happened in these last chaotic few days, but just when I thought everything would work out, I was taken by those titan fanatics. And even then, I thought I could handle it. But days down there in the dark, stared at and talked about, and finally that human flesh atrocity,” he paused and gesticulated vaguely, “You saw the aftermath of that.”

The empty air sat stagnant between the two. Finally, Eren had opened up, and while it wasn’t what Levi had expected, it was something he could work with.

“Just so you know, I’d heard similar myths to the one you mentioned, and I grew up in the underground of wall Sina. I’ve seen the absolute worst of humanity and no matter how monstrous I’ve seen humans act, even the rare cannibalistic ones, none of them became titans. It has nothing to do with your emotions or deeds.

“You likely were a weird titan thing for who knows how long before Trost, but you were still you. No one noticed any change, not that scary, clingy girl who follows you around, or that smart kid with the haystack hair.” Eren appeared personally affronted for his friends and Levi gladly accepted any reaction from him. Anything was better than that dead look in his eyes from earlier.

“And while you’re painfully human, even if an annoying, brash one at that, it’s the fact that you can turn into a titan that gives you the potential to save so many more lives. Your cadet friends in Trost would’ve been doomed if you were only human. You would be dead. Many died in the reclamation of Trost, but humanity achieved something they never had a hope of achieving before. The fight against titans has never looked less bleak and one-sided than it does now.

“You wouldn’t be in the Survey corps if we saw you as an uncontrollable monster. And sure, you’re under my watch because of your mysterious titan power, but you wouldn’t be part of



my squad if I didn't see you as at least a semi-competent soldier. That is when you keep your temper under control. So, while Erwin is gambling with the benefit of your ability with the higher ups, under my custody you will be treated like a normal soldier. There will be experiments and tests on your titan form, but that's because you must hone every skill and ability in your repertoire to stand a chance against the titans. You've had some hiccups in controlling that titan form of yours, but that's what Hange and I will be here for."

Eren looked close to tears again, this time those of relief from the fear and stress that had been building for over a week with only few respites. He craved his humanity, to be told there's nothing wrong with him, more so than any food. He wanted to earn his freedom, he wanted his merit to mean something; that he became strong of his own accord, that his dreams and ambitions weren't stupid.

Maybe after all this, everything would work out. Things would be different, but changing the lens he viewed it all through, he still had so much to gain and protect. His titan ability was an unearned power seemingly thrust on him, but he could make it his own and change things for the better. Alongside Squad Levi, and with training, hard work and determination -his usual tools of the trade- he'd hone this skill as another outlet for his strength.

Levi walked back over to his horse and retrieved a second ration block, once more sitting opposite Eren.

"Let's try this once more, shall we?" The boy had forgotten he was still holding his. A mixture of Levi's words, their quiet surroundings and being able to watch the man opposite him eat while he did, allowed him to eat without issue. Levi almost smiled at the Eren's astonished expression when he beheld the empty wrapper in hand, finishing the bar without noticing.

When they get back to base, he'd be welcomed with a check-up from Hange, rest and a meal, but this was a start. Levi personally dreaded the debrief he'd have to give to Erwin, and all the paperwork he'd need to fill out (and falsify). They'd figure out the particulars when they arrived back. And it was time to get moving while it was still dark.

Before he made a move, he spotted thin wisps of steam rising hesitantly through Eren's bandages. The other was entranced, lifting an arm to better view the odd phenomenon. It was a truly inhuman ability, but he looked intrigued instead of disgusted, curious instead of apprehensive. Levi removed the cloth coverings to glimpse the last tendrils of steam escape, leaving unmarred skin behind. Rotating his wrists, Eren found no pain or stiffness like what he'd been suffering from since his healing had previously given up.

Instead of finding it freaky like he had outside the courtroom, he was honestly beyond relieved to see the kid finally patching himself up. Perhaps he didn't heal earlier to conserve energy, but he doubted the nutrition would've kicked in so quick and the blood loss was counterintuitive to that idea. Or it could be a matter of control. He wondered if the healing relied on Eren *wanting* to heal. If so, he was worried to think the kid didn't want to earlier but was glad he did now. He kept all these musings to himself to examine some other time; likely after he got some much-needed sleep.

“So now you decide to heal. Yeah no I’m filing that away for Hange to analyse when we return. You can make up for my ascot later. I’m sick of everything about this place, let’s get out of here.”

With that, he helped Eren get shakily to his feet. While still weak, he held himself up with renewed resolve. He might be barely able to stand, but with the look in his eyes, he would run if prompted. Hardly requiring help into the saddle behind Levi, they slowly picked their way out of the woods and back to the rocky road leaving the town and events of the night behind.

They rode off back to the headquarters, the night not looking as dark as before.

## End Notes

This is the longest story I've written and while I attempted to make it coherent/readable, feel free to comment if there's any mistakes in it, how I can improve, or anything else you want to say :)

Edit 06/08/2021: Just to say, I never read the AOT: Before the Fall series and didn't know there were actually Titan Cultists in that until I stumbled upon it in the Wikia today. Obviously the group I made up are totally unrelated to the other.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!